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ABSTRACT

Expert opinion asserts that involving children in formal learning activities at too early an age is an educationally and developmentally unsound practice. Since economic conditions requiring both parents to work are likely to continue, child care services of differing quality are likely to proliferate. Such services must be selected with care. Parents must select the situation that is most appropriate for their child, rather than the one that is most convenient or least expensive. Making wise choices about such important matters can be more easily done if parents and schools communicate better. Parents need to understand the uses and abuses of standardized tests, the dangers of both authoritarian and anti-authoritarian caregiving environments, and ways early childhood educators are improving their professional practices. Much helpful information is readily available in articles written for the general public. (RH)

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Hothousing of Preschoolers Discussed

Susan Partridge

Hothousing appears to be a new term coined by researchers to describe a trend toward the early educational stimulation of the very young - mere infants and toddlers. In no way do the educators, child psychologists, and physicians who question this practice mean to ignore the natural curiosity of the very young. They believe that children's development is sequential and that this development refers to things other than the intellect - things such as social awareness, interacting with others, and self concepts.

At a recent conference in Philadelphia, Dr. Irving Sigel, Distinguished Research Scientist at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey and the keynote speaker, is quoted by Glenn Collins (5) as saying that a devastating effect of hothousing is what a child "comes to believe about himself." Apparently, Dr. Sigel feels that children come to believe that they are valued for what they can produce and not for themselves.

To those who favor hothousing on the basis of children's natural urge to learn, Dr. Sigel, reportedly, raised the question, "But where is it written that children have the natural urge to learn Japanese or Susuki violin?" No doubt he was referring to some early instructional programs. Dr. Sigel is not alone in raising questions about programs which indicate the "pushing" of little children. Others have asked, "Do children need flash cards at twelve months and French at age two?"

The fact that some reports indicate that Project Head Start

established in 1965 for economically disadvantaged children proved beneficial doesn't negate the stand taken by those concerned about hothousing. Naturally, a child who has never seen a circus, for example, or heard a story about a circus, can't be expected to ask a question about one, but children of middle-class parents are now being hothoused. In fact, some consider hothousing "a middle-class phenomenon". Surely these children aren't economically disadvantaged.

The pressure currently put on parents to provide for their children is tremendous and often tears them between what they believe and what they're hearing reported. Consider this advertisement for a computer (offered in part) which appeared in the Durham Morning Herald on February 3, 1985.

> The Banana Junior 6000 ... Buy one before it's too late. Gene's mother wishes she had. Bananawrite, Bananafile, and Banana-manager is just what your four-year-old needs to compete in today's cut-throat world of high tech and high expectations.

Lovett S. Gray (7) reminds readers that Douglas Sloan, a professor at Columbia University's Teachers College calls the computer an "impoverished tool". Sloan says, "Compare a child painting a picture in which the child actually has to experience colors, has to learn to control the brush with large muscle movements, has to learn to draw a straight line, with the experience where the child sits motionless before the computer, moving a finger."

At the educational conference in Philadelphia, mentioned

earlier, speakers tried to help parents to come to grips with any mixed feelings about the early formal teaching of their children. Unstructured play received considerable emphasis. Dr. Patricia Minuchin, a research professor of psychiatry at the New York University Medical Center, reportedly, informed the audience that young children learn the most from play and interaction with their environment and from interaction with people. Professor Sutton-Smith, a development psychologist and another speaker, is said to have advised parents to "forget about teaching the children about numbers and colors and the like, and just play with them."

Sarah Bayliss (1) wrote, "Children who attend any type of play group or nursery for more than five sessions a week are more likely to behave in an anti-social way at home than non-attenders or children who go to fewer sessions."

Bayliss went on to say, "This finding, which emerges from new research at Bristol University, holds true regardless of children's sex or of their family and social backgrounds."

She offered a quote by the authors of The Social Life of Britain's Five-Year-Olds - a Report of the Child Health and Education Study: "Attendance for six or more sessions per week at any type of pre-school institution was associated with a small, but not unimportant, increase in anti-social behavior."

Bayliss stated several appreciable changes, apart from behavior, in children's abilities as a result of pre-school attendance. She reported:

> Children who went to any type of nursery or play group scored higher in vocabulary tests and in cognitive ability tests, as measured by the English Picture Vocabulary Test and the Copying Design Test respectively, than those who stayed at home.
>
> The impact on children's vocabulary, however, was far less than other aspects of their lives such as socio-economic and family circumstances.
>
> Unexpectedly, the researchers found that children who started infant school early, before the age of four years and four months, had reduced EPVT scores compared with those who started school later. But the rising-fives entry had improved scores in the Copying Design Test. "This suggests that pre-school education has a greater influence on conceptual maturity or fine motor skills than on vocabulary."

In another article, "Four-Year-Olds Suffer Stress in School," Bayliss (2) states that many of the four-year-olds attending primary schools full-time are failing to get an education suitable for their age, yet there are those people who want the entry date lowered. In the article, Bayliss discusses the case for statutory nursery education put before the Commons. This seems important in view of the fact that some want the entry date lowered. Hopefully, the final decision will be in the best interests of the little children.

As preschools increase in number, great care must be taken to get the right school for the right child - "the best possible match." Nancy H. Clark (4) reminds her readers that Carol Hendin, liaison for directors of early childhood schools to the Independent Schools Admission Association of Greater New York says, "Each institution goes about the task a little different-

ly. There's no such thing as a best school - as there's no best child. You're trying to make the best possible match."

A number of working parents have been heard to say that they chose a pre-school because it "was close to home" or "was the least expensive". This is unfortunate because the child is the victim. It is felt that both parents and school personnel share the responsibility of getting the right school for the right child, as it might prove disastrous, for example, to place an easy-going child in a high-pressured school.

Fortunately, there are parents who realize the importance of effective home/school communication if the best interests of their children are to be served. Furthermore, they are willing to express their feelings as to how this communication can be improved.

Canadians, Juleen Cattermole and Norman Robinson (3) completed two studies in different school environments to determine effective home/school communication from the parents' perspective. They found that parents' preferences with regard to the communication are relatively stable. The following information, given verbatim, seems to sum up the results of their study and offer food for thought for school personnel:

> The findings of these two studies also suggest that home/school communication can be improved without spending large sums of money. An expensive public relations effort is neither necessary nor likely to be effective. Relying on formal parent groups at the building level as sources of public opinion or as a means of distributing information about the school is probably a

> mistake. If schools really want to communicate more effectively with parents, they have only to develop more traditional modes of home/school communication that rely on direct, personal contact between educators and parents.

Parents and educators might do well, too, to communicate with the little children whose remarks are often enlightening and suggestive of solutions to their problems.

Clark, mentioned earlier, reports a conversation between her and little Kenneth, not yet five, who had completed an ERB* test that most New York City private schools require for admission.

> Clark: How did it go?
> Kenneth: It was O.K. But I don't want to do it again EVER.
> Clark: Oh? How come?
> Kenneth: Because it WASN'T a game, it wasn't fun, and the man kept saying, "Your time is up." Will you buy me a toy now?

Clark discusses the use and abuses of standardized tests on the very young. She raises the question, "What is this ritual we impose on our children - at an age when we should be considering playground, not percentiles; bicycles, not bell curves - and why?" Clark feels that if parents understand the uses and abuses of standardized tests, pressures on both them and their children can be eased. Fortunately, articles discussing this can be readily found in current periodicals, and there is evidence that many parents are willing and anxious to cooperate with school personnel.

Many people are aware of what babies can do and are often surprised and sometimes shocked at the phenomenal feats they

* Educational Records Bureau 6

perform. The problem is the "pushing" of the very young by their parents rather than following their natural curiosity, as it is believed that babies learn best when they do the choosing.

Patricia Gradsby (6), Medical Editor of Good Housekeeping has this to say about the "pushing":

> Some experts even worry that if parents push babies too much, they may turn them off learning altogether. Their advice to parents: relax, have fun with your children. If you share their excitement in the world and help them explore it, they'll grow up ready to learn about anything.

Lest the move against hothousing result in the neglect of little children, Dr. Sigel, the keynote speaker at the conference in Philadelphia, mentioned earlier, make a very clear distinction between hothousing and neglect. He is reported as saying that "although authoritarian teaching environments for young children can have negative effects on their development, this does not call for the antithesis - a libertarian, anti-authoritative posture." Apparently, Dr. Sigel was paraphrased by another researcher who is said to have put it this way, "Hothousing ain't so hot, but you don't want to have an untended garden, either."

"Threading Your Way Thought the Pre-School Maze", the title of an article by Thornton (8), expresses the dilemma with which parents are now faced in selecting the best schools for their preschoolers. Thornton did report some encouraging news, however, in the words of Marilyn Smith, the Executive Director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children: "We are trying to upgrade the profession to assure parents that

when children are away from home they are not just physically safe but are in intellectual and social environments that will develop them for life."

Finally, the concern about pre-school education is not peculiar to any one country. Hopefully, continued research, the sharing of ideas, the involvement of parents and listening to the little children, and the acceptance by school personnel of their share of the responsibility will result in a solution in the best interests of the little children.

Conclusions

It is concluded that hothousing the very young children can be counter-productive and that it is the shared responsibility of both school personnel and parents to match the right child with the right school (if any).

Implications

Both parents and school personnel should become aware of the possible damaging effect of hothousing on the very young children, and they should share the responsibility in selecting the right school for the right child.

Communication lines should always be open, and all concerned should feel free to speak with candor.

School personnel and parents should avail themselves of current research articles dealing with the educational "pushing" of the very young and with other articles written by people extremely knowledgeable about these children - teachers, child psychologists, medical personnel, etc. Fortunately, some of these articles can be found in reputable periodicals readily available to the general public.

The present economic situation requiring both parents to work seems here to stay. In some cases, this calls for reshuffling of values, and it is felt that the best interests of the child concerned should receive top priority. It is also felt that most parents would concur on this.

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